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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth in the field of interpersonal communication has outstripped educational planning in the field, resulting in the espousal of questionable methods of selecting and presenting the materials germane to interpersonal communication. One of the more recent directions of instruction in interpersonal communication has been toward a "skills" orientation, advocating instruction in communication skills such as empathy, self-disclosure, and listening to increase the student's interpersonal competence. A rhetorical analysis of the requirements and strategies for teaching interpersonal communication via this skills approach reveals that difficulties resulting from the skills approach stem from a lack of adequate research concerning the value and effectiveness of particular communication skills and the ability to teach and learn the skills. Until research confirms the value of specific skills, caution should be exercised in selecting skills to be taught. Teachers using the skills approach should follow these guidelines: (1) present the philosophy behind the choice of skills; (2) present evidence or lack of evidence for teaching the skills; (3) represent the skills in terms of their situational constraints; and (4) do not evaluate skill mastery; instead teach for mastery where there is support for the skill's value, while teaching rhetorical sensitivity in all other cases. (RL)

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A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS APPROACH TO COMMUNICATION INSTRUCTION

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A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS APPROACH TO COMMUNICATION INSTRUCTION*

Growth and activity in the field of interpersonal communication is proceding at a staggering pace. It has been only ten years since the pioneering efforts in interpersonal communication appeared (e.g., McCroskey, 1968). Yet, in this short time the area has grown to the point where it stands side by side with rhetoric and public speaking divisions in university speech-communication departments across the country. All of the major communication associations include an interpersonal division, and further indication of the area's wide popularity is found in the proliferation of interpersonal communication textbooks.

Unfortunately, the area's rapid growth has outstripped its planning, resulting in a chaotic multidirectional branching out, and the espousal of questionable methods of selecting and presenting the materials germane to interpersonal communication. One of the more recent directions interpersonal has taken is a communication "skills" orientation (Bochner & Kelly, 1974). Such an approach advocates the teaching of interpersonal communication skills such as empathy, self-disclosure,

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listening[1] in order to increase the student's interpersonal competence[2]. It is the purpose of this paper to present a framework for assessing the position of the "skills" branch of interpersonal communication. The requirements and strategies for teaching interpersonal, as well as the implications thereof are presented.

Requirements

The requirements for being an interpersonal professional may be viewed via a rhetorical metaphor. The IP professional must appeal to his audiences. These audiences are basically comprised of hierarchic interaction levels within the university setting. At the highest level the university proper

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1. Several skills oriented texts and one such article further suggest the value of openness, sensitivity, feedback, acceptance of self and other, descriptiveness, owning feelings, and flexibility (Bochner & Kelly, 1974; Brown & Van Riper, 1973; Fitts, 1970; Johnson, 1972; Keltner, 1970).

2. Interpersonal competence is defined as the dual process of diagnosis, or understanding the interpersonal context, and effectuation: the capacity to act on one's understanding (Bochner & Kelly, 1974).

(deans, administration) must be won over[3]. It is no secret that university departments compete for funding on the basis of enrollments, productivity of faculty, etc. A relatively new field, such as interpersonal, must present itself as legitimate, as needed, and as deserving of its share of funds.

Moving down the hierarchy to the departmental level, a new audience emerges. Department chairpersons, committees on hiring, on curricula, on appropriating funds must be satisfied by an instructor's high class enrollments, sufficient numbers of advisees and dissertation committee seats. At the classroom level is met, perhaps, the most significant audience of all. This is the crucial audience level whose satisfaction impinges upon the satisfaction of each successively higher level. The student must become a believer. He must be made to recognize his interpersonal deficiencies. One basic interpersonal text, to this end, includes a check-

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3. That such audiences are not always sympathetic may be illustrated by the following anecdote. When a student of this writer was being interviewed for a national fellowship by a university screening committee an interesting process occurred. Whereas interviewees from such disciplines as math, English, history were evaluated on their academic record and plans for the future, she, an IP major, was questioned at length on the legitimacy of her field. She was not recommended for the award.

list of skills with which the student rates himself on a nine point scale from "terrible" to "excellent" in response to such statements as: "My ability to be appropriately self-disclosing is ... [Johnson, 1972]." The student must be made to feel that the deficiency can be alleviated through the mastery of the proper interpersonal communication skills. Finally, he must be made to believe that the interpersonal communication course is the very place where he can learn the proper skills.

The difficulty of meeting these requirements are compounded by the nature of the material being dealt with. First, the open, empathic, sensitive communicator is not always the most persuasive, especially in a competitive situation (Simons, 1976). Second, interpersonal communication is lacking in universal premises, and in consensually and empirically validated premises. Of the interpersonal texts surveyed (see footnote 1) not one provided adequate empirically based support for the value of the skills presented. Little is known, for example, about the functioning of empathy outside of the therapeutic situation[4] or of the

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4. It has been empirically supported that a high level of therapist empathy facilitates patient's constructive personality change (Truax, 1963; Truax & Carkhuff, 1964, 1965). The significance of generalizing this finding to other contexts remains to be seen.

teachability/learnability of this concept qua skill. Self-disclosure has recieved considerable attention (Jourard, 1961, 1968, 1971), but recent study of this area leads to the conclusion that there is much to be learned about the workings of this concept. Gilbert and Horenstein (1975) found, for example, that the valence of the content of self-disclosure affects the receiver's response. Upon this and other qualifications the authors conclude, "Thus the 'transparent self' is not, perhaps, the ideal model for all people."

While such "skills" as listening, openness, flexibility, acceptance, may be intuitively compelling there is little research to indicate how much of the skill is desirable, or in what contexts. Further, the teachability of some of these skills is suspect. Consider how a student would learn "behavioral flexibility" in a course in which he is evaluated on the degree of skills mastered. The central objective of behavioral flexibility is to free the individual to relate in new ways (Bochner & Kelly, 1974). Is there not a paradox in using coercion via grade to facilitate the mastery of this behavior? Perhaps, acceptance is not a skill at all, but rather behavior influenced by a particular ideology or moral concern.

Little is known of the consequences of mastering such skills as feedback. Might not this, self-and-other, monitoring process preclude "participation," in the phenomenological sense, in relationship? In the "We" relationship there is no place

for observation; this depth of relating is predicated upon total absorption of self by the moment (Schutz, 1970). Thus, the nature and the present state of interpersonal communication make meeting the requirements difficult. The interpersonal communication professional attempts to alleviate these problems, and to meet the requirements of the university system, by resorting to certain strategies.

Strategies

The strategies employed by the IP professional are of two basic types: strategies to enhance appeal to students and strategies to increase legitimation. The first of these is enacted through persuasion based upon a hidden ideology. The premises of this ideology are that "interpersonal underdevelopment" is bad, and learning interpersonal skills leads to a better life. The student is denigrated for lacking a particular skill and promised lavish reward for the mastery of the skill. This approach is manifested in several interpersonal texts.

One text in touting "openness" contends that it is the rare person who can remain closed and demonstrate any potential. These closed types are lonely, bored, strangers while the open person can more fully enjoy himself and feel significant (Brown, et al, 1973). Keltner (1970) maintains that people are basically selfish, but man's growth and development are predicated upon his ability to be "sensitive" to others. Ineffective interpersonal behavior is increased through sup-

pression of feelings and increased as feelings become more conscious, discussable and controllable (Johnson, 1972). The person who does not self-disclose is emotionally detached; self-disclosure facilitates trust development and empathic response (Bochner, et al, 1974). The texts further maintain that particular skills must be learned in order for a person to have effective and fulfilling relationships (Johnson, 1972). It is through exploration of the uses of speech that a person expands his ability to relate effectively to others (Brown, et al, 1973). The skills (empathy, self-disclosure, etc.) become "god" words; the deficiencies (detachment, closed, etc.) become "devil" words[5].

The second basic type of strategies, those designed to increase legitimation, are primarily directed toward presenting the IP professional as "scientist". To this end several means are employed; one of the most effective is appeal to authority. Invoking the "gods" of the field is a frequently used means of legitimation. If one's theory, hypotheses, words can be linked with the names of prominent individuals, or can be said to be supported by the work of a Jourard, Rogers or Sullivan, for example, the spell is cast. It matters not that the big name

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5. Simons (1976) discusses the persuasive functions of these approval or derision terms (pp. 26-27).

support is in the form of hypothesizing which in turn may be based upon someone's earlier hypothesizing, with few observational checks in between.

Legitimation is also conjured up by the language used by the IP professional. Interpersonal has its jargon (is jargon) as does any field. Such terms as interpersonal competence, effectuation, self-disclosure, paraprofessionals (in Bochner, et al, 1974) serve to increase the mystique of the field. Jargon also serves to shield the area from too critical scrutiny by outsiders. Besides jargon, the IP professional must have a vocabulary steeped in "scientific" words. Words such as interpersonal laboratory, communication apprehension scale, Interpersonal Relationship Scale, instrument, validity, reliability, randomization, normal distribution, parametric, analysis of variance, regression analysis are commonly heard in the university speech department. These science denoting words may mask the lack of firm empirical foundation. It is not being suggested that they be eliminated from the interpersonal communication field, but rather, it is suggested that these words not be allowed to lull the IP professional into the false feeling that he is privy to scientific facts or laws. Interpersonal communication is a fledgling science, and as such, the utmost importance must be placed upon continued questioning and testing of hypotheses and theories.

Implications

Besides the potential obscuring of the need for continued

research, there are other implications resulting from the strategies used to meet the requirements presented. Perhaps these implications may best be illuminated by a presentation of those parts of the IP field's current stance which are defensible and indefensible (see table 1). It is defensible that knowledge and research is incomplete in the interpersonal communication field, given that no field has complete knowledge. Further, IP is a relatively new field and the methodologies and statistical techniques for dealing with complex communication behaviors are just being developed. Rogers and Farace (1975) report, for example, that there are few observation systems for categorizing interaction or process. This lack of methodology constrains the type of research which can be conducted. It may not be sufficient to consider such variables as empathy, self-disclosure, or acceptance outside of the context of dynamic interaction. Hence the knowledge claims which can be made in IP are limited. It is indefensible to represent hypothesis as fact, to maintain that untested skills are valuable and should be learned.

It is defensible that well tested and supported skills are presented in the classroom. It is defensible that untested skills are presented in the IP classroom, provided the rationale for the choice of skills and their tenuous nature are specified. The student may be taught to be rhetorically sensitive to such skills, but the student's freedom of choice should be preserved. It is indefensible that the student be required to fully in-

corporate untested skills into his behavior system, or be evaluated on the degree of skill manifested. A medical student would not be required to use an untested drug. He might be required to learn about the drug, but he would not administer it to himself or his patients until its utility and safety had been sufficiently demonstrated. So, too, an IP student should not be required to make an untested skill an integral part of his behavior, i.e., to come to manifest this behavior unthinkingly or spontaneously.

It is defensible that IP present itself as scientific in those cases in which it meets criteria for good science. This is when hypotheses, well founded in strong theory, have been empirically tested under rigorous conditions. It is indefensible that the IP field present itself as scientific when it is being rhetorical. The difference between science and rhetoric is in the nature of the proofs offered: the scientist and the philosopher offer 'proofs' that are relatively free of extra-factual and extra-logical factors, whereas persuasion attempts to make premises acceptable to a particular audience, whether true or not.

It is defensible that the IP person attempt to appeal to students and to the university. Besides being necessary for survival such appeal is important in insuring that the benefits of work and discovery in the field be disseminated. Such appeal should preserve the integrity of the IP professional and his audience. It is indefensible that these ends justify any means.

Behaviors must not be presented as interpersonal liabilities or assetts unless sufficient empirical support is available. The unqualified value of a skill must rest upon empirical foundations. The IP professional must not obscure or misrepresent via language.

Several implications for teaching interpersonal communication emerge from the preceding discussion. It is evident that the IP field needs to conduct more research on communication skills. Until the value of various skills is adequately shown, caution should be exercised in selecting skills to be taught. In teaching skills several points must be observed:

1. Present the philosophy behind choice of skills.
2. Present evidence for value of skill or lack of evidence where necessary.
3. Fully represent skills in terms of situational constraints upon, and degree or level of, skill important/useful.
4. Do not evaluate skill mastery; teach for mastery where there is support for value of skill. Teach rhetorical sensitivity in other cases.

It is hoped that these criticisms and suggestions will provide needed direction for the IP field. Interpersonal communication has a potentially tremendous contribution to make to our knowledge of human behavior. It must be insured that such contribution be made with utmost concern for human integrity.

Defensible	Indefensible
1. Knowledge and research are lacking or incomplete.	Hypothesis is treated as fact.
2. Skills are chosen on some specified basis and presented as arbitrary where necessary.	Studen's be required to incorporate all skills into behavior system.
3. Field present self as scientific when it meets criteria for good science.	Field present self as scientific when it is being rhetorical.
4. Field appeal to students and university.	Ends justify any means, e.g., deficiencies as devil words, skills as god words. Heralding unqualified value of skill. Obscuring via language.

Table 1

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